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ABSTRACT

Decision-making in Reading Recovery requires skills of observation and reflective analysis that many teachers have not had to learn in order to be good classroom teachers. This is because Reading Recovery sets the teacher a very complex task which involves the construction of a curriculum for each individual child--a curriculum that is consistently and regularly contingent upon that child's current knowledge and emerging awareness, and which is guided by the teacher's close observations, her understanding of Marie Clay's theory of literacy acquisition, and her own experience with various paths that different children may take in the process of becoming literate. These decision-making processes can be compared to action research which has been described as "a form of professional practice, a research process, and a reflective way of teaching" (Arhar, Holly, and Kasten, 2001). This article aims to increase Reading Recovery teachers' awareness of the cycle of decision-making steps that underlie good Reading Recovery teaching, and to enable them to think about the many ways they can bring their teaching into balance so that the children they serve have an increased opportunity to develop self-extending literacy learning systems. The article outlines a 10-step decision-making model for Reading Recovery teachers. It also provides 13 questions to help teachers analyze themselves as Reading Recovery teachers. (NKA)

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A Decision-Making Model of Reading Recovery Teaching: Figuring Out What To Do When.

by Noel K. Jones

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A decision-making model of Reading Recovery teaching: Figuring out *what* to do *when*

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People who enter training in Reading Recovery are often surprised, if not overwhelmed, with the tasks of making decisions in their teaching. Many novices seem to expect that decisions about procedures to use in lessons will be fairly clear cut, but nothing could be further from the truth (Jones, 1992). Every action of teaching during a Reading Recovery lesson represents a decision that the teacher must make for that child at a particular point in time. Looking for shortcuts or routine ways of doing things is ineffective in enabling the acceleration of children's learning.

Decision-making in Reading Recovery requires skills of observation and reflective analysis that many teachers have not had to learn in order to be good classroom teachers. This is because Reading Recovery sets the teacher a very complex task which involves the construction of a curriculum for each individual child — a curriculum that is consistently and regularly contingent upon that child's current knowledge and emerging awareness, and which is guided by the teacher's close observations, her understanding of Clay's theory of literacy acquisition, and her own experience with various paths that different children may take in the process of becoming literate (Clay, 1993b, 1998).

These decision-making processes can be compared to action research which has been described as, "a form of professional practice, a research process, and a reflective way of teaching" (Arhar, Holly, & Kasten, 2001, p. 15). The information that guides Reading Recovery teachers in their actions and choices must come from several different sources which are guided by a wide range of considerations derived from theory. This article will attempt to analyze the decision-making steps in which Reading Recovery teachers engage as they work with individual children. It will also present and explain some of the considerations and principles that guide teaching decisions that are intended to support children's learning. The aims of the paper are to increase Reading Recovery teachers' awareness of the cycle of decision-making steps that underlie good Reading Recovery teaching, and to enable them to think about the many ways they can bring their teaching into balance so that the children they serve have an increased opportunity to develop self-extending literacy learning systems.

A decision-making model

Decision making begins with *observation* of the child's *current strengths, knowledge and capabilities*. The skillful teacher observes the individual child to find out what is secure knowledge, that is, what the child is able to do with accuracy and fluency, or at least with correctness and control. The teacher must also observe and make inferences about the child's ability to process information when

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A decision-making model ...

engaged in reading and writing tasks. *Processing* may be defined as the ability to use information of more than one kind to solve problems quickly. Useful questions that aid the observation of processing behavior include: Does the child monitor and attempt to correct his own performance, even on simple tasks? Does he learn new letters and/or words fairly easily, or does he have great difficulty entering new information into his long-term memory? On what kinds of texts can the child attend both to meaning and some aspect of visual information on the page?

Classroom teachers do not have time or opportunity for such sensitive observation, and indeed, most children can learn under conditions that are not so focused on the individual's knowledge and needs. However, in order to initiate and enable accelerated learning for the lowest children in the classroom, a much more individually sensitive program is necessary. This is one of the major justifications for Reading Recovery as an early intervention for the lowest performing children.

Closely related, but somewhat different, is observation of the child's partial knowledge and developing awareness of new knowledge (Clay, 1998). The Reading Recovery teacher's observation skills must be sensitive enough to distinguish *emerging knowledge* from *achieved knowledge*. *Achieved knowledge* is under the child's control, for example, the ability to read and write a certain word consistently, or the ability to search all sources of information to problem-solve a new word. *Emerging knowledge* is just beginning to come into the child's notice, but she cannot use it independently or she uses it inconsistently. For example, a teacher might notice that a child is now aware of word spaces on the page (and puzzled when he doesn't match with the language message), or he is aware of the identity of a word in reading that he cannot yet write.

Another important factor to consider is any *special problems* that *this* learner may have. All Reading Recovery children have problems in acquiring literacy, but special problems may be posed by factors such as limited control of English, dysfluent use of language, a strong tendency to invent text, difficulty in attending to print, etc. (Clay, 1993b).

Based upon observations of the child's achieved and emerging knowledge, and his ability to process information, the teacher puzzles over what the child is just ready to learn next. This difficult decision draws upon the teacher's understanding of Clay's theory of beginning literacy. The teacher's overriding purpose is to help this child develop a literacy learning system that becomes self-extending.

The Reading Recovery teacher's observation skills must be sensitive enough to distinguish *emerging knowledge* from *achieved knowledge*.

Acquisition of strategies is all-important, but items must also be learned so that the child can use this knowledge strategically on appropriate texts. Specific areas of processing — such as hearing and recording speech sounds in sequence in writing, the ability to read fluently for meaning, the ability to recognize and respond to letters quickly, etc. — also must be considered at this decision phase.

The Reading Recovery lesson format is a great help to teacher planning, but within that framework, decisions must be made about choices and levels of books, about specific procedures, and about what to emphasize with this child. Plans are made not only for the next lesson but also for the next few lessons; all plans are made with an attitude of tentativeness and flexibility, allowing for quick revision based upon daily observations. This is a time that teachers may consult Clay's texts, particularly *Reading Recovery: A guidebook for teachers in training* (1993b), and perhaps seek advice from a colleague as well. The teacher enters each day's lesson with an intention of what the child needs to learn or learn to do with greater control in *each part* of the Reading Recovery lesson and a plan for how she is going to enable the child to realize that intention.

The decision-making responsibility does not stop here. As the teacher implements the procedures she has chosen, she puts herself again into the role of sensitive observer of the child, but now she also has to learn to become a sensitive observer of her own teaching (a point which will be discussed below in greater detail). Reading Recovery teachers take a running record of the child's reading each day, and they also keep records of the lesson events and interactions. Most teachers add to their records after the lesson is over, making more detailed notes about what the child was attending to and what she could do; also, they make notes about their own teaching moves during the lesson. These records are of utmost importance; they provide the means by which the teacher engages later in in-depth analysis of child and teacher performance patterns that may give clues to acceleration or, conversely, to lack of progress.

The next step in the recursive decision-making process is *evaluation*. In addition to sensitive observation during the lesson, the teacher needs to reflect, each day, about whether the child was able to extend his or her learning as she had intended. The analysis may be brief if the child is making the forward moves the teacher had hoped and expected. But if there is limited progress, even for two or three days, the teacher needs to engage in a more careful and formal analysis of the child's responding and of the lesson interactions. In such cases, evaluation leads to new hypotheses about the child's learning and processing and a search for different or additional procedures, materials, books, and teaching strategies.

A diagram of this recursive decision-making process is presented on page 3. This is, of course, an oversimplification of the processes teachers engage in. The steps of the process as described here may overlap or intertwine and teachers go through the cycle many times in the process of teaching a child.

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A decision-making model ...

If the teacher becomes concerned about very limited progress after four or five weeks (and perhaps before), and *after she has engaged in thorough analysis* of the child's progress, his program, and her own teaching, it may be time to *seek assistance from others*. Clay advises in clear terms, that if a child is finding it hard to accelerate, "There is only one position to take in this case. The programme is not, or has not been, appropriately adapted to the child's needs. It is time to take a close look at possible reasons for this, and colleague comment is what the teacher should seek" (Clay 1993b, p. 56).

How is the teaching supporting the child's learning?

An important part of the re-analysis, alone or with a colleague, is to reconsider one's assumptions and hypotheses about how the child is functioning and what might be holding him back. Clay suggests that the teacher re-examine or check on, ". . . your analysis of the child's difficulties, new explanations [of his difficulties] that might apply, the intactness of the reading process on easier material, whether the child's writing behaviour is improving" (Clay, 1993b, p. 57).

But Clay stresses also the need for teachers to check on their own teaching behavior. ". . . Often he has learned to do something which is interfering with his progress, and he may have learned it from the way you have been teaching" (Clay, 1993b, p. 57). The question of how the teaching is supporting the child's learning is important to consider in working with all Reading Recovery children, but it is critical in those cases in which the child is making poor progress.

The goal for all children, of course, is that they develop a literacy learning process or ". . . self-extending system for literacy learning that includes reading and writing" (Clay, 1991, p. 325). Key indications that this is occurring include self-initiated monitoring, searching, self-correction, and other kinds of active problem-solving strategies. However, we expect also that children will be able to work on increasingly more difficult texts with fewer appeals for help; that the searching, checking, and correcting activities will become more rapid and efficient; and, that the child's problem-solving will begin to use more advanced strategies such as analogies and tentative decisions awaiting further information to be discovered later in the text (Clay, 1991).

Some kinds of teaching, although well-intended, can inhibit this from happening in many ways. Some would be obvious, such as doing everything for the child and not allowing independence. Others are more subtle traps that teachers may fall into unwittingly, sometimes for only one of the children they are teaching. The following suggestions are not complete, but they capture a large percentage of the issues I have personally observed in my own teaching and on the many visits I have made to teachers over the past 10 years.

One of the first questions to ask might be, *Are you keeping the learning easy enough so that the child continues to be an active, productive learner?* Accuracy is not the only indication of book difficulty. The text should require some "reading work" on the part of the child, but this reading work may actually occur in accurate reading. We can often be surprised by the amount of psychological and physical effort that may go into a child's accurate reading of a text. It is easy to fall into the pattern of making the learning too difficult. For example, a teacher might choose non-patterned text to foster greater attention to print (for a child who relies on memory in reading patterned text) and end up with choices that are too difficult for the child. Once text level becomes too difficult, other things will need to be sorted out after introduction of the book that will not have been worked out in the first reading or after the running record taken the following day. This may lead to book choices in familiar reading becoming too hard and, hence, fluent reading disappears. Also, the amount of work in writing may have become too great. Perhaps this has occurred for those children who seem deliberately to compose simple sentences and object to writing more.

According to Clay, "Two kinds of learning must be kept in balance: on the one hand there is performing with success on familiar material which strengthens the decision-making processes of the reader

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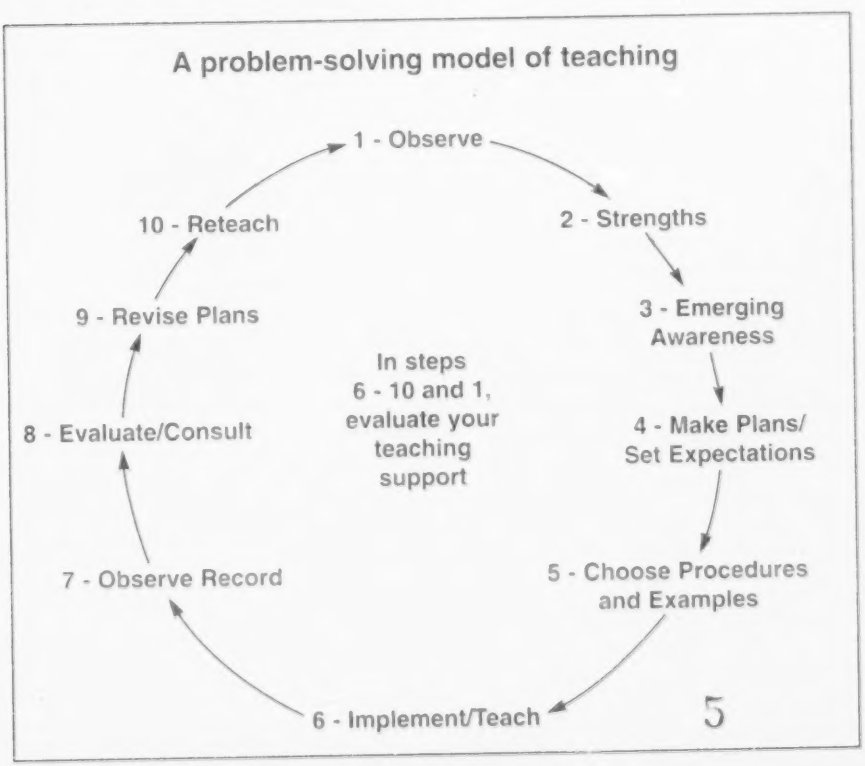
A problem-solving model of teaching
1 - Observe
2 - Strengths
3 - Emerging Awareness
4 - Make Plans/ Set Expectations
5 - Choose Procedures and Examples
6 - Implement/Teach
7 - Observe Record
8 - Evaluate/Consult
9 - Revise Plans
10 - Reteach
In steps 6 - 10 and 1, evaluate your teaching support
5

A decision-making model ...

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as he works across text, and on the other there is independent problem-solving on new and interesting texts with supportive teaching. . . " (Clay, 1993b, p. 9). What is harder to determine is how hard the text reading should be during the time that reading work occurs. Instructional level is judged to be in the range of 90% to 94% accuracy; yet Clay's early research demonstrated that self-correction level is also an important indicator that processing is going on, and that the readers who progressed well typically read at 95% accuracy or greater (Clay, 1982).

Another important question is, *is the teaching stressing accuracy or item learning at the expense of strategic processing?* It is difficult to divest ourselves of the belief that accurate reading is important for learning progress, so we often find ourselves compelled to bring attention to errors that the child would (at his current level) not be able to detect himself. Some teachers retain a tacit belief that children learn to read primarily by acquiring items of knowledge (words and/or sound symbol associations). This belief can lead the teacher to direct the child's attention rather narrowly to visual information in print rather than observing and building upon the child's emerging awareness of the many aspects of print such as book organization, story structure and meaning, relationships among oral and written words, and many other dimensions of literacy and language.

The imbalances I have mentioned so far tend to lead to obtrusive teaching practices — teaching moves that tend to usurp the child's notice and intent and move him or her to a somewhat passive approach to learning. Being kind but too helpful, or talking much more than the child can attend to, are other ways that teachers can unwittingly foster dependence and passivity.

But there are ways of teaching that lead to imbalances in the opposite direction as well. Teaching can many times not be obtrusive enough. Allowing a child to persist with a habit or practice that interferes with learning is counterproductive as well. Teachers may need to teach strenuously to get a shift in a child's performance, or to get the child to work hard enough to learn a word, or to pay attention to punctuation, or to consistently follow the directional rules of English. The tricky issue, of course, is how to judge when to teach hard and insistently, when to teach with a light touch, and when to leave the child alone. Although advice to cover all cases is impossible to give, if a teacher is reflective about her teaching, and if she becomes a careful observer and problem-solver, she will be more capable of judging when these moves tend to help or hinder learning.

Teaching may fall short of supporting learning or may actually interfere with acceleration and learning progress in many more ways. However, rather than discussing further possibilities, let me offer instead a set of questions (see the Table, below) that teachers might use in analyzing themselves as Reading Recovery teachers or in analyzing the teaching support they are giving to a particular child who is finding it hard to accelerate. These questions are not the only ones that might be considered, nor would any one person need to think about all of them. They are offered only as a resource to remind us of the many ways that our teaching may go astray

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Table. Questions to help you analyze yourself as a Reading Recovery teacher

1. Do you use a problem-solving approach to your teaching? That is, do you observe carefully, analyze children's strengths, analyze notes and records, use the Guidebook and other resources to plan instruction, observe results, and re-plan as needed?
2. Is your teaching supporting the development of strategies and problem/solving, or is it over-focused on acquisition of items of knowledge?
3. Are you stressing accuracy at the expense of strategic problem-solving, even when the child responds with only approximate responses?
4. Are you observing children very carefully and following their notice and their notions?
5. Are you using the lesson format and procedures in the Guidebook as intended?
6. Are you prompting to achieve balanced attention to meaning, structure and visual information?
7. Are you observing progress in your children and taking action if it is unsatisfactory?
8. Have you helped children establish a solid repertoire of known items?
9. Are you fostering independence in all parts of the lesson, particularly independent use of strategic problem-solving in reading and writing?
10. Do your lessons reflect a balance between fluency and reading work?
11. Are you keeping the learning easy enough so that the child continues to be an active, productive learner?
12. Are you working with the classroom teacher and home to support learning?
13. Do you have a sincere commitment to the role of early intervention specialist:
    - Do you have productive, 30-minute lessons daily with every child?
    - Do you try to focus your teaching to make progress every day?
    - Are you concerned and take action about slow student progress?
    - Do you request and use suggestions from others?
    - Are you determined to succeed with every child?

A decision-making model ...

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and become part of the problem that stands in the way of a child's accelerated learning.

Reflecting and analyzing one's own teaching is not always a comfortable thing to do, and it certainly is not easy. Overlooking problems is most likely to occur when teachers attempt to assess their own teaching because the perceptions and judgments are generated from the same belief system that underlies the teaching performance. Clay advises teachers,

> You are likely to have some blind spots in these areas and the opinions of colleagues could be most useful for the readjustment of your programme. It has been one of the values of the Inservice Training sessions that teachers have been able to pool their collective wisdom on their most puzzling pupils (1993b, p. 57).

In seeking assistance of colleagues, teachers need to be careful not to relinquish personal responsibility for analysis and reflection. Rather th. n requesting or expecting colleagues or a teacher leader to problem-solve *for* them, teachers will be requesting others to problem-solve *with* them, and then only after they have made a continuous and sincere effort to understand the child and the teaching program for that child through their own analysis.

Reading Recovery teaching will always be challenging and difficult because it involves analysis and problem-solving of the most difficult learning cases, each of which requires skillful, daily decision-making based upon an individual child's unique needs. However, the challenge, and the ability to succeed with many children in the face of that challenge, is what is both rewarding and interesting about Reading Recovery teaching. Certainly Reading Recovery teachers don't stay in this program for the opportunity to read books like *Nick's Glasses* (Cachemaille, 1982) or *Mrs. Wishy-Washy* (Cowley, 1980) fifty to one hundred times!

Through their initial training and through their continuing professional development, Reading Recovery teachers come to understand and use the decision-making processes that this article has attempted to describe. Teachers need to realize that continued improvement in their teaching effectiveness depends upon their ability and commitment to improve as analysts and problem-solvers of children's learning and of their own teaching. Clay's work, and the work of hundreds of Reading Recovery teachers, has shown us what is possible, and if there is any possibility of bringing a child back onto a successful learning path, then we have both a moral and professional obligation to find out how to do it and to make it happen.

Solving the learning problems of the children we see in Reading Recovery can be extremely difficult. Yet every time teachers succeed in achieving a break through with children, they increase their own understanding and ability to teach, which brings benefits for the many children still to come.

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